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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 001248

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NEA/MAG (HOPKINS/HARRIS); DRL (JOHNSTONE)
LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/13/2017
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: TUNISIAN ACTIVIST CLAIMS OFFICE FIRE IS ARSON

REF: A. TUNIS 1058

[1](#)B. TUNIS 1044

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) During a September 6 meeting, attorney and political activist Ayachi Hammami told PolOff he believes the fire that ravaged his office on August 31 was deliberately set by representatives of the government. Hammami speculated that the attack was prompted by his drafting a report on the Tunisian judicial system, which he was scheduled to present at an international conference in Europe September 8 - 9. The fire destroyed Hammami's only copy of the report, in addition to his computer, desk, and some current case files. The police have begun an investigation. End Summary.

If You Can't Stand the Heat...

[1](#)2. (C) During a September 6 meeting in his office, attorney Ayachi Hammami, explained the circumstances of the fire. Hammami, a founding member of the October 18 movement, an alliance of disparate human rights and political activists that includes moderate Islamists, told PolOff that when he arrived at his office the morning of August 31, he found the top lock of his exterior door unlocked. This struck Hammami, as he said he habitually locks the upper lock of his exterior office door. Upon entering his office, Hammami said he noticed that the door to his inner office, which is normally left open, was closed. Hammami said that upon opening this door, he was immediately surrounded by dense black smoke and could feel the heat of a fire. He left the office to call for help. Firefighters controlled the blaze.

[1](#)3. (C) When Hammami re-entered his office, he said he noticed that the casing for his computer's hard drive had been pried off, and it appeared as if newspapers had been stuffed inside and set on fire. His computer and desk were charred, and several of his case files were damaged. Hammami then showed PolOff his secretary's office, which is next door to his own. Though his secretary is currently on vacation, Hammami pointed out that newspapers, which he said are normally left on a table in a nearby waiting area for clients, had somehow migrated to his secretary's desk. Hammami said he found the case for the hard drive of his secretary's computer pried off and thrown in a corner, and

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the newspapers on the desk were smoldering. He was able to

smother the flames, he said, and the only damage to the room was a few scorch marks on the desk.

Was it Something I Said...?

¶4. (C) Hammami says he interprets the incident as a warning from the GOT. On September 8 - 9, he was scheduled to present a report he authored on the Tunisian judicial system (which was critical of judicial independence) at an international conference in Europe. Conference organizers had asked him over the phone to send them copies of the finished report by September 3 or 4, so that it could be printed in bulk for the conference. The August 31 fire destroyed the only copy of the report before Hammami could send it to conference organizers. He told PolOff he still planned to attend the conference and give an oral outline of what he had prepared, then attempt to recreate his work upon returning to Tunisia.

¶5. (C) Hammami said the nature of the fire in his office, and the state of his secretary's office, have convinced him that the fire was not accidental. Various Tunisian activists have alluded to the belief that their calls are monitored. Hammami believes his intention to send the report the week of September 2 was overheard. Hammami opined the fire was deliberately set by government operatives who did not want him to present his findings in Paris. He said he had considered other possibilities, but could think of no other parties with motive.

One Day at a Time

¶6. (C) The day after the fire, Hammami told PolOff he made a statement to the police detailing his experiences of August 31, and conveying his theory as to who was behind the fire. When the police asked him to sign a statement, he noticed the statement contained a line saying he had no idea who was behind the incident. Hammami objected, and left the station without signing the statement. Soon after he returned home, he was issued a summons to appear before a judge as a victim in the arson investigation. He attempted to testify, but the presiding judge would not allow him to be accompanied by his attorney. (Note: Tunisian law allows victims legal representation in court proceedings. End Note.) Hammami refused to testify without his lawyer being present, leading local GOT-owned papers to report that Hammami was refusing to cooperate with the investigation. Hammami clarified to PolOff that he does want to cooperate, but will not testify without his attorney's presence.

Comment

¶7. (C) The fire in Hammami's office is certainly suspicious and was probably arson. Although the destruction of the report does appear to benefit the GOT, there is only circumstantial evidence to support Hammami's statements alleging official culpability. Nevertheless, the GOT has used strong measures in the past to stop criticism. We will watch this case closely, particularly whether the police investigation proceeds rigorously and fairly. End Comment.
GODEC